

Testimony on HB-435 – Senate Local Government Committee

March 20, 2013

Mr. Chairman, committee members, my name is Dan Ellison and I live in Helena where I serve as a City Commissioner. I appear today in support of HB-435, particularly as it would apply to the use of coal trust funds to implement railroad quiet zones in communities along the rail routes from Eastern Montana to the west coast.

First, let me acknowledge the importance of rail traffic and the transportation of coal through this community. As you know, responsible development of Montana's coal resources, and the infrastructure and labor required in transporting that resource provides a variety of good jobs and is a major source of revenue for state and local governments. The effects from this revenue source multiply through communities and provide funding that supports a wide range of municipal needs and services.

Along with the benefits, and as the bill acknowledges, there are impacts from the train traffic through our community. One that I hear fairly often concerns the noise from train whistles. The expectation that additional coal development will result in more trains coming through town has been the subject of public meetings here, and residents have visited with our commission about steps that could be taken to improve rail crossing safety while mitigating noise impacts. We have 5 at-grade crossings in Helena, and finding a way to implement a quiet zone would provide a measurable benefit in this community.

HB-435 includes provisions to assist communities between the coal fields and the west coast ports. Currently the number of coal trains through Helena is less than the 12 per day the bill considers for a serious impact. However, additional coal development and/or expansion of those shipping ports could, in time, increase the number of daily trains to a level that would allow Helena to qualify for the quiet zone grant. We would like to be prepared for that contingency.

Over the long term, passage of HB-435 will assist Helena and other communities in dealing with the impacts of added rail traffic. I'm grateful for Representative McChesney for bringing the bill forward and encourage you to pass it out of committee.

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